

ALEXITHYMIA AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO EMOTIONAL DEPRIVATION

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Abstract

Background: This study aimed to examine the relationship between alexithymia and emotional deprivation among undergraduate students of the Faculty of Arts, at the University of Jordan.

Subject and method: The sample consisted of (662) students (244, males, and 418 females). The Toronto Scale (TAS-20) and Emotional Deprivation Scale were used.

Results: The result revealed a high level of alexithymia among the sample, moreover, emotional deprivation was low. Results also showed a negative correlation between alexithymia and emotional deprivation. There were no significant statistical differences in the level of alexithymia and the level of emotional deprivation due to gender, age, or the interaction between them.

Conclusion: The results of the study indicated higher level of alexithymia is accompanied by lower levels of emotional deprivation.

Keywords: Alexithymia, Emotional Deprivation, Students, University.

1. Introduction

1.1 Alexithymia

Acquiring and developing social skills is of utmost importance as it assists individuals in adapting to challenges and maintaining a positive outlook in various situations. However, some individuals struggle with learning and acquiring social communication skills due to difficulties in identifying and expressing their emotions, as well as their inability to understand the emotions of others, which presents challenges for them. This condition is known as alexithymia, and it is characterized by an individual's inability to

maintain social relationships with others without considering it a mental health disorder. The term was coined by the psychoanalytic psychiatrist Peter Sifneos in 1972., and it is a compound word composed of two parts: "lexis," meaning deficiency, and "thymia," meaning emotion, to become a term signifying the absence of words for emotions (Daud, 2016).

Social upbringing holds great importance in teaching a child proper responses to different situations and training them to satisfy their needs in ways acceptable to society; this requires training

the children from the very beginning of their life in proper social communication skills and expressing their emotions in a manner appropriate to the various situations they encounter. It is worth noting that the exchange of feelings and emotions between the family and the child is of paramount importance because it helps the child express their love, care, sadness, and anger based on the circumstances. Emotional deprivation that a child may experience in the early years of life can affect the development of alexithymia.

Alexithymia is a condition in which an individual finds it difficult to identify, describe, and express their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. They struggle to focus on feelings related to their inner experiences because they lack dreams and imagination, becoming preoccupied with external events (Gilbert et al., 2011). Numerous studies suggest a connection between alexithymia and various disorders, including digestive, respiratory, eating disorders, anxiety, alcohol consumption, and social isolation (Karukivi et al., 2011), understanding the feelings of others and knowing their suffering, joy, or sorrow is essential for fostering empathy towards others. Therefore, individuals with alexithymia lack this kind of empathy, causing Therefore, those who experience alexithymia to lack this kind of compassion, leading others to distance themselves and withdraw from them. (Decety and Jackson, 2004; Aldao et al., 2010).

Studies have also indicated a genetic role in the occurrence of alexithymia, particularly after examining identical twins. Additionally, there is an environmental influence resulting from family upbringing patterns (Valera and Bernbaum, 2004).

Many researchers have shown interest in identifying the symptoms of alexithymia, such as Taylor (1997), as mentioned in the work of Al-Masry and Al-Nawaiseh (2019). Some of these symptoms include difficulty in identifying emotions, difficulty in describing emotions, lack of imaginative capacity, and an individual's strong connection with the external world.

Psychological theories have offered explanations for alexithymia, psychoanalytic theory suggests that alexithymia may result from an individual's fear of serious organic illness, traumatic experiences, frustration, or conflicts encountered when interacting with environmental stimuli, all of which play a significant role in human development. Cognitive theories, on the other hand, view alexithymia as a state of consciousness reflecting an individual's inability to perceive and interpret emotionally arousing situations, leading to a disrupted emotional response in which the individual cannot differentiate between their emotions and the accompanying physiological responses (Al-Khawli and Al-Iraqi, 2013). Behavioral theory indicates that individuals learn alexithymia as a method of avoidance and escape from the consequences of emotional expression. They refrain from emotional expression due to fear of criticism or getting into trouble, making it a learned behavior. Social learning theory by Bandura suggests that parents' lack of proper emotional expression skills renders them unable to train their children in proper behavior (Al-Masry and Al-Nawaiseh, 2019).

2. 1.2 Emotional deprivation:

The family environment that nurtures warm and emotional connections with children is considered a conducive setting for raising a well-adjusted generation capable of building positive relationships within their

community. On the other hand, depriving a child of emotional warmth within the family can lead to feelings of hatred towards others, create a sense of hostility, and may contribute to depression. The effects of emotional deprivation extend into adolescence and beyond, with negative impacts becoming apparent in childhood, such as multiple intelligence and language disorders, behavioral disturbances, and self-awareness issues. These effects continue into advanced stages of life, affecting academic achievement, psychological well-being, and social compatibility (Lamia and Waseela, 2021).

Emotional deprivation has a clear impact on the behavior and personalities of teenagers. This is evident in their lack of love and care from their parents, resulting in an emotional void for the children and an imbalance in their personalities due to the absence of parental affection. This can lead to deviant behavior, drug addiction, aggression, and psychopathic behaviors, as well as a decline in linguistic skills (Mohammed, 2022). The causes of emotional deprivation vary depending on the perspective through which scientists view them. Some important causes of emotional deprivation include:

1. Absence of one parent due to divorce, death, or abandonment, as well as neglect, rejection, physical, psychological, or mental disabilities, or illegitimate relationships that result in the presence of a child who is later subjected to abandonment and neglect.
2. Rejection, which involves denying love, attention, care, or approval. It can manifest as hostility, aggression, indifference, explicit neglect, or clear rejection.
3. Lower socioeconomic status: Poverty and material deprivation can have an impact on an individual's mental and physical health, especially when combined with a lack of psychological and social support.
4. Incorrect social upbringing: Parenting methods based on neglect, cruelty, and violence can contribute to creating a significant gap between children and their parents.
5. Differential treatment of children: Parental favoritism and differential treatment among siblings can lead to feelings of frustration and deprivation in some children due to perceived injustice.
6. Parental emotional: The emotional detachment between parents can lead to emotional deprivation in children, as it deprives them of a natural emotional atmosphere, making them feel the bitterness of life.
7. Lack of psychological security: The feeling of insecurity within the family is very dangerous, as it leads to the absence of positive emotions and the provision of a warm relationship, resulting in the individual feeling unsafe in their surroundings.
8. Family disintegration: Family members' lack of cohesion for various reasons signifies the absence of emotional ties, resulting in emotional deprivation. Therefore, emotional deprivation eventually leads to the creation of an unbalanced personality that struggles to adapt and interact with others. They also lack social communication skills, and their lack of linguistic skills makes it difficult for them to express their feelings properly (Mohammed, 2022).

Theories vary in their explanations of emotional deprivation; The Psychoanalytic Theory by Sigmund Freud emphasized the importance of the first five years of a child's life, where experience and learning play a crucial role in shaping the child's personality. Conflicts, frustrations, and deprivation during this period can have a negative impact on a child's personality. Karen Horney also emphasized the significance of social and cultural factors in achieving harmony and believed that the causes of neuroses could be traced back to the quality of the child's relationship with their parents. Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory which is developed by Ronald Rohner (1980) highlights the importance of warm parental relationships for children. It consists of two poles: parental warmth and the absence of warmth or affection. Rohner also emphasizes the negative consequences of parental rejection or acceptance on children, whether these effects are cognitive or emotional, ultimately affecting the child's personality. Rohner (2012) notes that accepted parents are those who show love and affection toward their adolescent children, while rejected parents often express hatred and rejection.

Researchers have conducted various studies exploring alexithymia and emotional deprivation. The study of Al-Masri and Al-Nawaiseh (2019) aimed to examine the relationship between alexithymia and certain demographic variables. The study involved 400 students from Mutah University and used the Toronto Alexithymia Scale. The results showed that 61% of the students had a moderate level of alexithymia on the total scale and its dimensions, while 39% had a low level. There were no gender-based differences in alexithymia.

Thompson and McGraw (2019) investigated the relationship between

alexithymia, emotional deprivation, and attachment styles among university students. The study included 257 students who completed questionnaires measuring alexithymia, emotional deprivation, and attachment style. The results indicated statistically significant positive relationships between alexithymia and emotional deprivation, as well as a positive relationship between emotional deprivation and insecure attachment styles. Emotional deprivation partially mediated the relationship between alexithymia and increased attachment anxiety. These findings suggest that emotional deprivation and insecure attachment styles may play a role in the development and persistence of alexithymia among university students.

Al-Qaisi and Abu Droush (2018) conducted a study at Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, Jordan, the sample consisted of 392 students, Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) and Abu Ghazaleh and Jaradat's attachment scale. The results showed a negative correlation between alexithymia and secure attachment, while there was a positive correlation between alexithymia-avoidant and anxious attachment styles. Additionally, alexithymia was positively associated with gender and family size, but there were no significant differences due to parents' educational level.

Al-Jabalie and Ali (2018) investigated the relationship between emotional deprivation and self-efficacy among middle school students in Mosul, Iraq. The study found statistically significant gender-based differences in emotional deprivation, with females reporting higher levels. Self-efficacy was also found to be above average.

Qushtha (2017) study aimed to assess parental emotional deprivation and its relationship with depression and future anxiety among children residing in shelters

and those living with their families in Gaza. Emotional deprivation, depression, and future anxiety were found to be high among children in shelters.

Parker and Taylor (2017) examined emotional deprivation and the inability to express emotions (alexithymia) among incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals. The sample included 180 participants (90 incarcerated and 90 non-incarcerated). Incarcerated individuals showed significantly higher levels of emotional deprivation and alexithymia compared to non-incarcerated individuals. Emotional deprivation was found to be a significant predictor of the inability to express emotions and depression, suggesting that addressing emotional deprivation may help treat individuals who struggle to express their emotions, especially among prisoners.

Hamad (2016) explored the relationship between alexithymia among University of Baghdad students. The results indicated significant gender-based differences, with females scoring higher on alexithymia.

Gilbert et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between happiness, empathy, alexithymia, and depression in a sample of 52 individuals with depression. The results revealed a strong correlation between happiness, empathy, and alexithymia. The fear of positive emotions mediated the relationship between alexithymia and depression.

Shaheen (2013) study aimed to discover the differences in life satisfaction between individuals with high and low levels of alexithymia. The sample consisted of 250 students, and the results showed statistically significant differences between the two groups, with those with high alexithymia reporting lower life

satisfaction, the study also found gender-based differences, in favor of males scoring higher on alexithymia.

Karukivi (2011) explored the relationship between alexithymia and gender using the Toronto Alexithymia Scale. The results did not show significant gender-based differences.

Al-Bayani and Ali (2010) study measured emotional deprivation and its relationship with aggressive behavior among adolescents in Mosul, Iraq. The results showed that the sample experienced a moderate level of emotional deprivation, and there was a positive correlation between emotional deprivation and aggressive behavior.

Ismail's (2009) study identified behavioral problems experienced by emotionally deprived children in their family environments in Gaza, including misconduct, delinquency, depression, emotional symptoms, and peer problems.

Salman's (2002) study revealed parental emotional deprivation and its relationship with self-concept and social adjustment among children living with their parents in Baghdad, Iraq. Children deprived of one parent experienced severe emotional deprivation, had low self-concept, and suffered from poor social adjustment compared to ordinary children.

3. Objectives

Several studies have been conducted in some Jordanian universities and colleges, and the results in most of these studies have shown that the level of alexithymia was moderate, with no significant gender differences. Therefore, this study, which was conducted on students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan, aimed to determine the level of alexithymia among

students and whether there are differences attributed to gender and age. Regarding the study of the relationship between alexithymia and emotional deprivation, the scarcity of studies was an important motivation for this. Emotional deprivation may be a factor in the development of alexithymia; university life is based on adaptation, which requires social communication skills, primarily dependent on an individual's ability to express, identify, and describe emotions, as well as understand them in others. This study aims to determine the level of alexithymia and its relationship with emotional deprivation among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan. This study will answer the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of alexithymia among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan?
2. What is the level of emotional deprivation among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan?
3. Is there a statistically significant relationship ($\alpha = 0.05$) between

alexithymia and emotional deprivation?

4. Are there statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the level of alexithymia attributed to gender and age?
5. Are there statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the level of emotional deprivation attributed to gender and age?

4. Method

The researchers utilized a descriptive-correlational approach, as it is well-suited to the nature of the study's problem and its variables.

4.1 Subjects

The study's population comprised all male and female students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan for the first semester of the academic year 2022/2023. To achieve the study's objectives, a random sample of 662 male and female students was selected, representing 18.3% of the study's population. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of individuals in the study's sample according to the variables of gender and age.

Table 1. Study Sample

Gender	Age		Total
	18-22	22-25	
Male	142	102	244
Female	337	81	418
Total	479	183	662

4.2 Study Tools

Alexithymia Scale: To achieve the study's objectives, the researchers used the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Ts-20) developed by Bagby, Baker, and Taylor (1994). This scale was adapted for the Jordanian

environment by Dawood (2016). Dawood translated the scale into Arabic and established its psychometric characteristics. The scale consists of 20 items distributed as follows: dimension 1: difficulty describing Emotions (5 items), dimension 2 difficulty Identifying

Emotions (7 items), and dimension 3 externally oriented thinking (8 items). A Likert-type scale was used for responses, with the following responses: Completely Applies (5), Applies to a Great Extent (4), Applies to Some Extent (3), Applies to a Slight Extent (2), Does Not Apply at All (1).

Emotional Deprivation Scale: Emotional Deprivation Scale: Developed by Saadan et al. (2009), this scale consists of 36 items. A three-point Likert scale was used for responses: Always (3 points), Sometimes

(2 points), Never (1 point). The following criteria were used to judge the means: 1-2.33 Low, 2.34-3.67 Moderate, 3.68-5 High, and the psychometric characteristics of the scales were approved.

5. Results

To answer **the first question**, "What is the prevalence of alexithymia among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan?" means and standard deviations were calculated. Table 2 represents the findings.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Alexithymia.

Alexithymia dimensions	Mean	SD	Degree
Difficulty describing emotions.	3.72	.60	High
Difficulty identifying emotions.	3.79	.66	High
Outward-directed thinking	3.84	.54	High
Total	3.79	.49	High

From Table 2, it is evident that the prevalence of alexithymia among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan was high across all three dimensions and on the total score. It was found that externally oriented thinking had the highest score, followed by difficulty identifying emotions, while difficulty describing emotions had the lowest score. These results differ from other previous studies. Dawood (2016) indicated that the level of alexithymia among students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Jordan ranged from low to moderate, which is like the results of Al-Masry and Al-Nawaiseh (2020). The researchers attribute these differences to family upbringing in Jordanian society, which encourages the suppression of emotions and feelings to avoid being perceived as weak. Expressing

emotions is often associated with vulnerability, while emotional suppression is linked to strength, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural norms. Some argue that disclosing emotions to others often does not lead to effective solutions for emotional problems. Additionally, changes in family dynamics and the increased busyness of parents have reduced interaction with children and encouragement of positive emotional expression. The COVID-19 pandemic has also may had an impact, reducing access to individuals providing emotional and social support. Increased stress levels among individuals have made them less tolerant of others' emotional issues, and many consider emotional expression a form of psychological disturbance.

To answer the **second question**, "What is the level of emotional deprivation among students at the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan?" The researchers calculated the mean and standard deviation, resulting in a mean score of 1.67 and a standard deviation of 0.58, indicating a low level of emotional deprivation. This confirms the results of the question, as the level of emotional deprivation was found to be low, indicating that individuals in the sample are experiencing a high level of

alexithymia, making them unable to understand and interpret the emotions of others.

Regarding the **third question**, "Is there a statistically significant ($\alpha=0.05$) relationship between alexithymia and emotional deprivation?" Pearson correlation coefficients were used to determine the relationship between the dimensions of alexithymia and emotional deprivation, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between Alexithymia dimensions and Emotional Deprivation

	Difficulty describing emotions	Difficulty identifying emotions.	Outward- directed thinking	Total	Emotional Deprivation
Difficulty describing emotions	1.00	.48**	.56**	.84**	-.15**
Difficulty identifying emotions.	.48**	1.00	.53**	.76**	-.09*
Outward-directed thinking	.56**	.53**	1.00	.86**	-.07
Total	.84**	.76**	.86**	1.00	.001
Emotional Deprivation	-.15**	-.09*	-.07	-.13**	1.00

* Statistically significant for the significance level of 0.05

** statistically significant for the significance level of 0.01

Table 3 reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between describing emotions and each of the following: difficulty identifying emotions, outward-directed thinking, and the total score on alexithymia. Additionally, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between difficulty identifying emotions and each of the following: difficulty describing emotions, outward-directed thinking, and the total score on alexithymia. Moreover, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between outward-directed thinking and each of the following: difficulty describing emotions, difficulty

identifying emotions, and the total score on alexithymia. The table also shows that the total score on alexithymia is statistically associated with its constituent dimensions. Table 3 also indicates a statistically significant negative relationship between emotional deprivation and each of the following: difficulty describing emotions, difficulty identifying emotions, and the total score on alexithymia. Furthermore, emotional deprivation explains 2% of the variance in difficulty describing emotions, 0.8% of the variance in difficulty identifying emotions, 0.49% of the variance in outward-directed thinking, and

1.7% of the variance in the total score on alexithymia.

To answer the **fourth question**, are there statistically significant differences in the

level of alexithymia attributed to gender and age, means, and standard deviations for the total score on the alexithymia scale were calculated according to gender and age. Table 4 illustrates these findings.

Table 4. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Total Score on the Alexithymia Scale according to Gender and Age of Students.

		Mean	SD
Gender	Male	3.88	0.53
	Female	3.37	0.46
Age	18-22	3.77	0.46
	> 22	3.82	0.56

Table 4 indicates apparent differences in the mean scores for the total alexithymia scale attributed to gender and age. To confirm the statistical significance of these

differences, 2-way ANOVA was conducted, and Table 5 illustrates these findings.

Table 5. 2-WAY ANOVA for the effect of gender and age on alexithymia

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	sig
Age	1.047	1	1.047	3.244	.073
Gender	.038	1	.038	.116	.733
Gender* Age	.328	1	.328	1.015	.315
Error	56.793	176	.323		
Total	2638.452	180			

Table 5 shows no statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) in the total degree of alexithymia scores attributed to gender, age, and their interaction. This aligns with the findings of Ahmed (2016) and Shahin (2013), which also found no differences in alexithymia levels between males and females or across different age groups. This lack of significant differences could be attributed to similar family upbringing practices that impose similar restrictions and guidelines regarding emotional

expression and the necessity to suppress emotions out of fear of others exploiting them.

To answer the **fifth question**, which focuses on whether there are statistically significant differences ($\alpha=0.05$) in the level of emotional deprivation attributed to gender and age, means and standard deviations for the total emotional deprivation scale were calculated based on

gender and age. Table 6 illustrates these results.

Table 6. Mean and Standard Deviation for Emotional Deprivation According to Students' Gender and Ages.

Source	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	sig
Age	1.044	1	1.044	3.069	.080
Gender	.218	1	.218	.640	.424
Gender* Age	.007	1	.007	.020	.888
Error	223.850	658	.340		
Total	2077.873	662			

Gender	Age	Mean	SD
Male	22-18	1.67	0.57
	> 22	1.77	0.62
female	22-18	1.63	0.58
	>22	1.72	0.52

Table 6 indicates apparent differences in the mean scores attributed to gender and age. To confirm the statistical significance of these differences, a two-way analysis of variance was conducted. Table 7 illustrates these results.

Table 7. 2-WAY ANOVA for the effect of gender and age on emotional deprivation

Table 7 shows no statistically significant differences ($\alpha = 0.05$) in the total score of emotional deprivation attributed to students' gender, age, or their interaction. These results align with those of Mohamed (2022) and Al-Bayani (2019), as these studies also indicated no differences in the level of emotional deprivation between males and females. This could be explained by the fact that the current study was conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic,

during a period when family cohesion and emotional exchange increased. Additionally, children's attachment to their parents grew, as did the affection between family members, which contributed to emotional closeness. Furthermore, the rise of social media platforms promoting emotional and social support encouraged families to communicate more effectively.

6. Conclusions

The results of the study indicated that the higher level of alexithymia is accompanied by lower levels of emotional deprivation.

7. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

8. Recommendations:

Based on the results of this study, particularly regarding the elevated levels of alexithymia among students, it is essential to develop specialized workshops aimed at encouraging students to manage their emotions effectively and providing training on healthy social communication. Families should also be encouraged to help their children express their feelings and understand the emotions of others, without fearing any negative repercussions. Moreover, conducting further research on the relationship between alexithymia and self-esteem among college students and investigating the connection between alexithymia and body image is recommended.

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